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THE ORGANIZATION OF THE POST-OFFICE DEPARTMENT OF THE CONFEDERACY

JOHN H. REAGAN was born in Tennessee in 1818, when Andrew Jackson's name and the Second War with Great Britain were on the tongues of men. Jackson stood the representative champion of the Union. He had been its valorous defender at New Orleans; he was to prove its iron hero in the nullification controversy; and he was but an exaggerated type of the western pioneer who had pushed into the wilderness beyond the Alleghenies, daring all things, fearing nothing, building cabins, and laying the foundations of commonwealths. This westward migration from the older colonies had begun to be considerable only with the closing of the Revolution. In the ranks of those that moved forward to the conflict were many soldiers who had fought at Boston or at Cowpens. Among them was one Timothy Reagan, father of the Postmaster-General of the Confederacy. Inured to the hardships incident to the frontier, equipped with the resourcefulness inbred in the backwoodsman, and animated with the ideas current in his state that the Second War with Great Britain had been fought for the preservation of the Constitution and the Union, young Reagan came to hold an exalted view of both; and this exaltation never suffered abatement. At an early age, displaying the ancestral instinct, he left Tennessee and landed in Texas, where were fresh traces of the ravages of Santa Anna's armies. He had a voice in the early policies of the new-born Republic of Texas; favored annexation to the Union, was sent to Congress in 1857, and bore witness to the final curtain-fall on the impending tragedy of secession. His was one of the last and loudest voices levelled in the halls of Congress in an endeavor to lift the curtain and try another shifting of the figures with a view to avoiding the deadly struggle that menaced. Failing the Crittenden Compromise and all others, Judge Reagan started to Texas. On his way he learned of the call of his state for a secession convention, and of his having been appointed a member. He attended the convention, which assembled at Austin, and when their labors were done he found himself a delegate to the Confederate Congress called to meet at Montgomery. The die had been cast, and, like many another, the ardent Unionist became the Secessionist.

This brief sketch is given so that the large outlines of Judge Reagan's life may be discerned, and his preparedness for higher duties properly estimated. We shall find that those habits of mind engendered by his early contact with the sharp facets of life were the guiding ones of his career.

Judge Reagan did not reach Montgomery, Alabama—where were to assemble on February 4 the delegates of the seceded states—until after the organization had been completed, and the President and Vice-president of the Confederacy elected. And almost sinister is the warning note in his first interview with President Davis. The Judge writes:

I called on the President and in the course of our conversation I said to him, that if I had been present at the election I should not have voted for him. I explained, however, that my objection was not based on the ground of distrusting his fitness for the high office, but because I preferred him at the head of the army. This post he admitted would have been more agreeable to him. Furthermore, I added that I should not have voted for Mr. Stephens, because it was the first time I had known in history of a people embarking in a revolution and selecting as one of their leaders a person known to be opposed to it.

Not disturbed by the Judge's frank expression of his views, President Davis, on March 6, tendered him the portfolio of Postmaster-General. Reagan's surprise was complete, and his answer no less complete—he declined the honor. A second tender was also declined. This indeed seemed a post so thankless and so beset with difficulties that a respectable incumbent could not be found. Already in the press of organizing his Cabinet President Davis had offered the rôle to Mr. Ellet of Mississippi, who had been eight years a conspicuous member of Congress; and to Colonel Wirt Adams, a prominent citizen of the same state. These gentlemen had excused themselves on the ground of insuperable difficulties; and so had Mr. Reagan. But after this second declination, other forces were brought to bear on the unwilling judge. General T. N. Waul of Texas and the Honorable J. L. M. Curry of Alabama called on him and requested that he should accompany them to see the President. Once in the executive office, it was an easy matter to bring up the subject of the Post-Office Department, and presto he was urged by these gentlemen and by Mr. Davis to accept the appointment. His objection was

that our people under the Government of the United States, had been accustomed to regular postal facilities; that when the service under that Government lapsed, it would require considerable time to re-establish a regular postal system, and that in the meantime dissatisfac-

tion would arise on account of the interruption of mails. Poor service or no service, I urged, would probably lead to the supposition that the fault lay in the incapacity of the head of the Department; and so, while I professed my willingness gladly to perform my duty to the Confederacy, I said to them that I did not desire to become a martyr.

But the Judge was overborne in his objections. It was urged that there must be no admission of inability to organize any department of the government, and the President and those members of the cabinet present urged his acceptance of the portfolio, agreeing to aid and sustain him against unjust criticism. Reagan reluctantly yielded. He confessed, however, that, instead of feeling proud of the honor, he feared that a day would soon come when he would be condemned by the public for incapacity.

His fears concerning his fate as head of the department doubtless were real; they proved, however, utterly groundless. The work was entered upon with energy and intelligence, and in a degree scarcely matched by any of his associates. His eminently practical mind showed itself in his first measures, a brief account of which he has left in his "Memoirs":

On the way to my hotel from the meeting with the President, I was thinking of how I might obtain the necessary information to enable me to organize the Department, when I met H. P. Brewster, Esq., a lawyer of ability and brother-in-law of the late Senator Chestnut of South Carolina. I enquired whether he might go to Washington City for me. He said that he could do so, and agreed to go at once. I told Mr. Brewster that I wished him to perform an important service, and one not free from danger, and that I should like him to take an early train.

By the time that Mr. Brewster called at my hotel I had prepared letters to St. George Offit, chief clerk in the office of the sixth auditor of the Postoffice Department; to Benjamin Clements, chief clerk to the Postmaster-General; Joseph Lewis, the chief of the bond division; to Captain Schwartzman, the head of the dead-letter office; to Mr. McNain of the finance bureau; and to Mr. Hobby, Third-Assistant-Postmaster-General. I offered them positions in the Postoffice Department of the Confederacy, and I requested them to bring with them copies of the last annual report of the Postmaster-General and copies of every form in the Department, together with the postal maps of the Southern States.

Strange as it may seem, all of those to whom the Judge wrote, except Third Assistant Postmaster-General Hobby and a clerk in the department from Florida, quitted Washington on his summons and joined him in Montgomery, there to perfect the machinery for distributing the mails over the Confederacy. The recruits from Washington faithfully carried with them the blank forms and all necessary papers used in the dispatch of business. A postal map

of Texas was secured, but of the other southern states there were no charts, and these had to be made with considerable difficulty. Also much of the supplies for the department was purchased in Washington by Mr. Brewster, especially the heavy bound volumes; the rest was ordered from New Orleans.

The next step in the organization—once the appointments of the new-comers were registered—was the enlisting of subordinates.¹ All necessary officers and clerks were added, and then was opened the Judge's school for instructions. It held from eight to ten o'clock every evening. The attendance of all members of the department was required, and in this manner the routine was systematized.

One of the first things set about was the preparation of the appointment-book, which contained the names of the postmasters under the jurisdiction of the Confederacy, together with the data of their offices—the amount of receipts, and whether they were draft or collection offices. Also a complete tabulation was made of the names and addresses of the agents of the service, and of the compensation awarded to each. At the same time were prepared the books of the contract office, which showed all the mail-routes under the control of the new government, the names of the contractors on the star routes, and the contract price. Also all contracts with railroad and steamship companies for carrying the mails were brought under scrutiny; and all vacancies were disclosed and appointments made. Thus much done, the practical problems were ready for solution. Writes the Judge:

To organize the Department so as to carry out the purpose had in view by Congress;² to insure the continuance of our postal facilities in such manner as to meet the public necessities; to avoid the suspension of the postal service until a new system could be adopted and put into operation, and to prevent a serious shock to the public interests by a temporary suspension of mail service, were the first questions to be considered by the Department.

The Provisional Congress adjourned March 16, 1861, but the threatening events following President Lincoln's inauguration caused Mr. Davis to call Congress to meet April 29 in special session.⁴

¹ First, Second, and Third Assistant Postmasters-General were represented by the chief of the contract bureau, the chief of the finance bureau, and the chief of the bureau of appointments. It might be added that the officers and clerks in the new department were not so numerous by half as those engaged at like tasks in Washington.

² The Confederate Congress contemplated the establishment of a Post-Office Department on the lines of that of the United States, witness the early legislation in regard to the same; and it was, as a matter of fact, so patterned.

³ *Journal of the Congress of the Confederate States*, I. 153.

⁴ James D. Richardson, *Messages and Papers of the Confederacy*, I. 60.

With this in view he requested of his cabinet information concerning the progress in organization, so that he might inform Congress. These reports were handed in at a cabinet meeting, and the Judge was prepared to say that his department was completely organized, and that he was ready to inaugurate the postal service of the Confederacy.¹ Such a report might well have drawn from President Davis the question, "How were you enabled to do this?", for he was no doubt unaware of the completeness of the gleaning of the department at Washington by Mr. Reagan's agents.

In my report in which I proposed to take charge of the postal system of the country [writes the Judge] I requested that Congress should authorize me to continue in office by proclamation the postmasters then in service under the government of the United States, wherever they were willing to serve, until new appointments could be made, and to continue in the service the present contractors for carrying the mails, under their existing rates of compensation, where they were willing to serve, until new contracts could be made.

Congress promptly granted the authority asked by the Postmaster-General, and he issued his proclamation covering the points at issue.

In this same report the Judge had asked for an additional force of eighteen clerks, bringing the number of members of his department to thirty-eight, not including the watchman for the building. And it was announced that

The Department had advertised for bids [which were to be in by May 1] for contracts for the supply of mail bags, post-office blanks and paper for the same, wrapping paper, twine and sealing wax, circulars, marking and dating stamps, postage stamps and stamped envelopes, and for mail locks and keys.²

Thus all the material appliances for the successful management of the department were gradually assembled. But what gave the Judge most concern was the manner of making the transfer between the old and new systems. He published two documents (authorized by an act of Congress, approved March 15) with a view to allaying any anxiety on the part of the postmasters over the country, and no doubt to show to the authorities of the United States that he meant to respect as far as seemed meet the claims of that government in the premises. In one place he writes:

The Government of the Confederate States will not interfere with any existing contracts entered into between the Government of the

¹ There had also been perfected a bureau whose function was the auditing of the accounts of the department. But this duty was later assigned to the Treasury.

² See Davis's message of April 29, 1861, Richardson, I. 79-80.

United States and the present contractors, until it assumes the entire control of its postal affairs. This course is rendered necessary by the utter impracticability of mixing the employees of the two Governments in the same service.

The question as to whether the government of the Confederate States will assume any liability to present contractors, before it assumes the control of our postal affairs, involves the idea of liability on the part of the Government for the obligations of the United States before the Department shall be organized and ready to enter into new contracts. I am authorized to continue the existing contracts provisionally, by proclamation, until new contracts can be entered into.

All postmasters and employes of the postal service were instructed to render all accounts and to pay all moneys to the order of the United States authorities, as they had heretofore done, until the government of the Confederacy assumed entire control.

Another paragraph reads:

We must regard the carrying of our mails at this time by that Government as a great public necessity to the people of both Governments, resulting from their past intimate political, commercial and social relations, and alike important to the preservation of the present interests of the people of both countries; and while that Government, by its action, consults such considerations, our Government and its people should act with the same high regard for great public interests. Such a course on our part, springing from such motives will preserve the character of our people, without impairing the dignity of our Government, with far less injury to the people of both than would necessarily follow from precipitate action on the part of either.

The Judge furnishes an excellent illustration of the beclouded state of mind possessing the highest in authority in the South:

It was hoped that this course would have beneficial effects, by removing all doubts as to the duty, for the time being, of those engaged in the postal service, and by showing to the Government at Washington that so long as it continued to hold itself liable for the mail service in the Confederate States, it should receive all the revenues derived from that service. It was supposed, too, that it was greatly to the interests of that country, as well as to the interests of our own, to avoid a sudden suspension of the postal communication between the people of the two countries, and to avoid being brought at once into practical non-intercourse, which it was supposed would occur if this department had been required to assume control of the service before its organization, and before any time had been given to pass the mail across the frontier. And when that policy was determined on, it was not known that active hostilities would occur, but it was then supposed to be still possible that our separation from the United States might be peaceably effected, and that all questions relating to the public property and to pecuniary liability between the two countries, might be settled by them on terms of equality.

"Peaceably effected"! With red war gleaming on the horizon, these doctrinaire secessionists went on their way blindly parting hair from hair; and indeed in measures of infinitely more consequence than the regulation of the Post-Office Department.

Under the provision of the first section of the act of Congress of May 9, 1861, "to amend an act vesting certain powers in the Postmaster-General, approved March 15, 1861", the Judge was granted the requisite authority to fix, by proclamation, the date of the Confederacy's assumption of the control of the postal service within her borders. So on May 13 a famous paper was promulgated, fixing the first of June as the day for taking over the reins. Also it dealt with the formalities and modes of transferring the funds, postage-stamps, envelopes, and property, except mail-bags, locks, and keys—a measure which was necessary if any adjustment of accounts was to follow the termination of hostilities, "and was also necessary in order that there should be no time when these civil officials were not responsible to one or the other government". Some other matters discussed in this proclamation are important :

Whereas, by the provision of an act, approved March 15, 1861, and amended by the first section of an act approved May 9th, 1861, the Postmaster-General is authorized on and after a day named by him for that purpose, to take entire charge and direction of the postal service of the Confederate States; and all conveyance of mails within their limits from and after such day, except by the authority of the Postmaster-General, is hereby prohibited:

Now, therefore, I, John H. Reagan, Postmaster-General of the Confederate States of America, do issue this proclamation, notifying all postmasters, contractors and special route agents, in the service of the Postoffice Department, and engaged in the transmission and delivery of mails, or otherwise in any manner connected with the service, within the limits of the Confederate States of America, that on and after the first day of June next, I shall assume the entire control and direction of the postal service therein. And I hereby direct all postmasters, route agents and special agents within these States, and acting under the authority and direction of the Postmaster-General of the United States, to continue in the discharge of their respective duties, under the authority invested in me by the Congress of the Confederate States, in strict conformity with such existing laws and regulations as are not inconsistent with the laws and Constitution of the Confederate States of America, and such further instructions as may hereafter be issued by my direction. And the said postmasters, route agents and special agents are also required to forward to this department, without delay, their names with the names of the offices of which they are postmasters (giving the State and county) to be directed to the chief of the appointment bureau, in order that the new commissions may be issued under the authority of this Government. And all postmasters are required to render to the Postoffice Department at Washington, D. C. their final

accounts and vouchers for postal receipts and expenditures up to the 31st of this month, taking care to forward with such accounts all postage stamps and stamped envelopes remaining on hand, belonging to the Postoffice Department of the United States, in order that they may receive the proper credits therefor, in the adjustment of their accounts, and they are further required to keep in their possession to meet the orders of the Postmaster-General of the United States, for the payment of mail service within the Confederate States, all revenue which shall have accrued from the postal service to the said first day of June, next.

All contractors, mail messengers and special contractors for carrying the mails within the Confederate States, under the existing contracts with the Government of the United States, are hereby authorized to continue to perform such service under my direction, from and after the day last named, subject to such changes and modifications as may be found necessary, under the powers vested in the Postmaster-General by the terms of said contracts and the provisions of the second section of an act approved May 9, 1861, conformable thereto. And said contractors and special contractors and mail messengers are required to forward without delay the number of their route or routes and the nature of the service thereon, the schedules of arrivals and departures, the names of the offices supplied and the amount of the annual compensation for present services, together with their address, directed to the chief of the contract bureau.

Until a postal treaty shall be made with the Government of the United States for the exchange of mails between that Government and the Government of the Confederacy, postmasters will not be authorized to collect United States postage on mail matter sent to or received from those States, and until postage stamps and stamped envelopes are procured for the payment of postage within the Confederate States, all postage must be paid in money, under the provisions of the first section of the Act of March 1, 1861.

The course of Judge Reagan apparently met with the approval of the Washington authorities, for, as if acting in co-operation, the Honorable Montgomery Blair, Postmaster-general of the United States, soon promulgated a proclamation suspending on June 1 all mail-routes in the states embraced by the Confederacy.

The provisional Constitution of the Confederacy required the Post-Office Department to be self-sustaining after March 1, 1863.¹ The expenditures in connection with the mail service by the government of the United States, for the years ending June 30, 1860, in the states then under control of the Confederacy, amounted to \$2,879,530.79; and the receipts into the Treasury from the same states for that year amounted to but \$938,105.34, showing a deficit of \$1,941,425.45. With these figures before him, the task of overcoming such a deficit must have seemed hopeless. However, without entering into details, steps were taken to curtail expenses.

¹ Constitution, § 8, clause 7. See message of Davis, September 30, 1862, Richardson, I. 252.

Representatives of the various railroads were called together, and they agreed to cut by one-half the pay they were then receiving for carrying the mails; the rates of postage on letters, packages, and newspapers were raised (letter postage was five cents for one-half ounce); unnecessary mail-routes were discontinued; the number of trips on some routes was cut down; the weight of the mails was reduced through the abolition of the franking privileges; long routes were shortened so as to induce competition; and where there were duplicate routes one was dropped, and in many cases cross-routes were found unnecessary and abandoned.

The administration of the department was from the first most successful—indeed, it may be said to have been conspicuously successful. It was self-sustaining at every stage of the war, and each year there was a net income of receipts over expenditures. To have organized so intricate an establishment and carried it on satisfactorily for four years amid the raging of the bloodiest war-storm of the century is to have achieved an unusual triumph. That Judge Reagan did; and, as an administrative officer, when the chronicle of the Confederacy shall have been written, his name will stand high on the scroll.

WALTER FLAVIUS McCaleb.